



Serving Montana... Zoe Zulakis

Service: AmeriCorps (Montana Conservation Corps, Kalispell) and AmeriCorps VISTA (Montana Justice Foundation, Missoula)

Three Words that describe Zoe:

- ⚙ **Enthusiastic**
- ⚙ **Adventurous**
- ⚙ **Thoughtful**



Zoe Zulakis receiving the 2010 ServeMontana Award from Lieutenant Governor Bohlinger, First Lady Nancy Schweitzer and Commission Chair Chris Kolstad

Zoe's Service Story: For Zoe Zulakis, the small gift of a single pearl offered from the bony hand of a cancer-ravaged man living in a dilapidated trailer in Northwest Montana, served as a reminder that the simplest acts of service have the power to transform the world. Installing window kits in ramshackle trailers in this corner of the state was the last place Zoe imagined finding herself in October 2008. Just weeks before, she'd been building trails amid the spectacular peaks of Glacier National Park. But even that seemed an odd place for a young woman from Michigan who'd never hiked or camped or laid her eyes on a chainsaw before her arrival in Montana in May 2008.



Seeking adventure and an opportunity to give back, Zoe joined the Montana Conservation Corps in 2008. She started with “no expectations, a faint romanticized view of the Wild West, and perhaps a little bit of foolish wanderlust.” Who knew she would continue with a commitment to serve a third term with AmeriCorps more than two years later.

Making a Difference: In her first weeks in the Montana Conservation Corps (MCC), Zoe found the camping, weather, and heavy work with hand tools mighty challenging. During her crew’s first assignment planting 78,000 trees along Silver Bow Creek near Butte, it snowed and rained nearly the whole week. The crew was thigh high deep in cold mud every day. But Zoe persisted, buoyed by her own positive attitude and willingness to try new things and the support of crew leaders and fellow corps members. Soon she earned the respect of her peers for her work ethic and resiliency.



Zoe submitted the photo (at right) for the 2009 AmeriCorps national photo contest and received the second place award. This photo was taken during a project dragging out feet of snow from the Iceberg Lake Trail in Glacier National Park which captured the spirit of teamwork under the grandeur of Montana’s mountains.

After completing her AmeriCorps term of service with MCC, Zoe enlisted as an AmeriCorps VISTA (Zoe is pictured below with her fellow AmeriCorps VISTA members) with the Montana Justice Foundation in Missoula. Her project focused on enhancing communications among justice



organizations in Montana. She also stepped up to chair the AmeriCorps Member Advisory Council (ACMAC) ambassador committee to improve communications and networking



among AmeriCorps members serving across Montana.

Zoe recently committed to a third AmeriCorps term of service, returning to the Montana Conservation Corps as a crew leader. “I can’t think of a single experience that has shaped me more

profoundly than my year as a crew member in the MCC," she said. As a crew leader, Zoe hopes to facilitate the same kind of learning for our 2010 crew members to allow them to explore new avenues of development.

"Volunteerism" ...in Zoe's words: In writing about her commitment to service, Zoe reflects: "I volunteer because it makes me feel active and engaged, it makes me feel aware of the needs of my community, and requires some creativity in addressing how that need can be met."

At the end of her first term of service, Zoe drafted the essay, "Pearls of Wisdom," about her experience weatherizing a home in Northwest Montana. Her essay reflected her realization after five months of service with a small crew, that "compassion and humanity" and the commitment to others is the best way to "keep out the cold" and create a better world. Here is Zoe's powerful essay:

"Pearls of Wisdom" by Zoe Zulakis, Montana Conservation Corps Crew Member, Northern Rockies - October 29, 2008

There is a small shabby trailer tucked away in the closed down RV park on the south east side of Marion. A Dodge truck parks permanently next to it, its engine lays under it, shaded by its flatbed and encroaching weeds. The screen door blows open and shut in the wind, and the unmistakable smell of sewage swirls upward from the underbelly of the faded yellow home. I feel abandoned here.

A man comes to the door. It bursts open. "Oh that darn screen!!! Hello, come in come in come in." He wears a worn and mismatched sweatsuit, his skin is falling from his bones, his smile is bursting across his face, and his right hand is outstretched. "Hi I'm Chris! This is my son. Well thanks for comin! Glad you could fit me in."

And so I learn that this little inhospitable corner of the world, is home to the most loving person I will ever meet. Hanging from the ceiling in little drawstring bags are his treasures. Quartz crystals, small pearls, knickknacks which he finds beautiful and enjoys. The corners of his living room hold his guitars, relics of his past, and on his coffee table are countless bottles of poisonous medication, which will determine whether he will have a future.

We quietly assess the home while he asks us about our lives; about what we love to do; about who we love. He shows us pictures of family, and sings some of his favorite tunes. He becomes faint from the excitement but even after sitting talks himself silly. Four cracked windows, no smoke detector, no CO detector, no carpeting, only two rooms (the kitchen and the living room) which are finished, broken pipes, freezing cold floor, and a lot of dishes which are for naught because of his constant nausea. He brushes aside cancer as though it isn't an elephant in the room. As though it hasn't taken up enormous space in his life, as though it hasn't left him abandoned and broke in this naked place. And you only realize the tragic truth when you look into the eyes of his son who helps change light bulbs and laughs at his dad's jokes, but who steps outside for a cigarette, hanging his head, knowing that his father will probably not be around long enough to feel the cold that will seep into the windows of this broken down home.

We chatter happily as our work progresses and suddenly the windows and doors are sealed, the light bulbs are shining, the detectors are beeping, and our job is done. It seems brighter, perhaps warmer. "Open your hand!" He grins at me. I open it. "Close your eyes!" I close them. I feel a cold hand on mine. And then I feel a small smooth pebble. I know what it is. But I am afraid to open my eyes. Afraid that I might cry. Afraid that I am angry for him. Angry that I can give him plastic windows

but that I cannot save him. Angry that in this dreary home he will see the last of his days, and that he is giving away one of the few beautiful things that he owns, away to me.

I open my eyes anyway. There is not a bone of anger in him. He admits to no frustration in the face of this great injustice. None of that. He is simply smiling with the anticipation of a 2-year-old. I thank him profusely, tell him that his treasure is beautiful, because it is the most beautiful gift anyone has ever given me, and I turn to leave.

"Wait!" He says. He takes Eli into one arm, and cradles me in the nook of the other, and pulls us toward him. We wrap our arms around his tall skeleton. When I look back up he looks sad but smiles. "Thank you. It was nice meeting you!" The screen door creaks and slams behind us and the unmistakable smell of sewage again composes itself. But I no longer feel abandoned here. I am accompanied, instead, by grief and anger, and in my pocket, a small pearl- a reminder that even if plastic cannot keep out the cold, maybe compassion and humanity still can.

The Governor's Office of Community Service and the Montana Commission on Community Service greatly appreciates Zoe's contribution to her community.

Thank you to Jono McKinney for letting us know about Zoe!

April 1, 2010